THE EXPERIENCE OF SOLDIERS IN SOUTH AFRICA
CHAPTER TWO

“VALUABLE, GALLANT AND FAITHFUL ASSISTANTS”: THE FINGO (OR MFENGU) AS COLONIAL MILITARY ALLIES DURING THE CAPE-XHOSA WARS, 1835–1881

Tim Stapleton

Most colonial armies operating in Africa during the nineteenth century employed large numbers of African allies. Examples from Southern Africa include the British use of Swazi mercenaries to overwhelm the Pedi in 1879, the Natal Native Contingent during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and Cecil Rhodes’ “Cape Boys,” who fought to establish Southern Rhodesia in the 1890s.1 Perhaps no single African group became as important to colonial military success or fought alongside the British as long as the Fingo (or Mfengu) of the Eastern Cape. From 1835 to 1881, the Fingo played a progressively more central role in the gradual eastward advance of the Cape Colony and the establishment of colonial rule. Although the Fingo are mentioned in every history of the Cape-Xhosa Wars, there are few narratives that concentrate on their military significance.2 One exception is a chapter by historian Richard Moyer, written in the early 1970s, that stresses the role of the Fingo as a buffer between settlers and Xhosa in the 1840s and 1850s and the Fingo acquisition of firearms but does not go into much detail on their battlefield contribution. The piece also skims over Fingo participation in the

1 For example, see Peter Delius, The Land Belongs to Us: The Pedie Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth Century Transvaal (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), and P. S. Thompson, Black Soldiers of the Queen: The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879 (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1997).